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AUTHOR Conyers, James E.
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ABSTRACT

Deficiency theories of racial inequality are basically inadequate in explaining observed racial differences between groups. Nonetheless, throughout the history of our country, both political leaders and prominent educators have propounded the notion that the inferior social status of blacks is due to some inherent deficiency in their make-up. Seldom are deficiency theories cognizant of the possibility that the "deficiencies" in question might be results, rather than causes, of the inequalities the theories seek to explain. Such theories encourage us to look away from the dominant group, the class structure, and the larger social system for the explanation of racial inequality. It is only through effecting basic changes in the larger society that equality among all racial groups can be achieved. (GC)

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by

James E. Conyers

Professor of Sociology

Indiana State University

Terre Haute, Indiana

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DEFICIENCY THEORIES OF RACIAL INEQUALITY*

Social inequality has been a perennial and ubiquitous topic in the social sciences and all sorts of ideas, theories and models have been advanced to interpret, explain or defend inequality in social systems. To trace the treatment of social inequality in social systems would be an ambitious undertaking indeed; therefore, with the minor exception of some general notions about social inequality, the paper will discuss one principal type of inequality, i.e., racial inequality. Even here, however, the discussion will be limited to only one of the broad theoretical formulations of racial inequality: deficiency theories of racial inequality.

Barrera states that deficiency theories of racial inequality ultimately rest on the proposition that the inferior economic, social and political statuses of racial minorities are due to some deficiency within the minority groups.[1] In general, the causative deficiency has assumed three broad varieties: (1) biological, (2) structural and (3) cultural. A discussion of each follows a brief statement on the general nature of social inequality, a statement occasioned by the assumption that racial inequality is but one instance or type of social inequality, as well as by the belief that any theoretical discussion of racial inequality should have some relevance and generalizability to the larger question of social inequality and the question of who gets how much of what and why.

Leonard Reissman contends that an ideological bias exists in the American system with respect to inequality, a bias revealed in the manner in which the rhetoric and promise of "equality" is emphasized over the day-to-day realities of "inequality."[2] The serious student of inequality is thus put in an undignified position because one is much more likely to find information on "differences," "opportunities," "relations," and the like, by race, age, sex, religion and ethnicity, than information listed under "inequality." These neutral-sounding types of emphases blur our understanding of inequality and allow us to emphasize "equality" over "inequality" "without facing the contradictions that daily experience with inequality continue to produce."[3]

As a general statement, the position is taken that the genesis of real social inequality, as opposed to mere social differentiation, is rooted in the evolution of the production process. The existence of surplus was a pre-condition for structured inequality. As Turner and Starnes state: ". . . production of more than was absolutely necessary for survival created a basic problem: who should get how much?"[4]

Economic inequality is basic to an appreciation of inequality; however, a comprehensive view of inequality does not end here, for economic inequality makes possible other forms of inequality, such as inequality in political and ideological spheres.

> "Once inequality is legitimated by ideas, the power of the wealthy is dramatically increased. They no longer must expend as many of their resources on forcing acceptance

of their privilege; they can now use increased power to gather even more of the economic surplus."[5]

Race has been one of the ascriptive bases for the structuring of social inequality in American society. As Reissman has said, "being black in America means quite probably the inheritance of inequality in every aspect of life that makes a difference."[6] Documenting this contention by Reissman could be done by examining the relative position of blacks in America in the principal institutional sectors of life; however, since the objective of the paper is theoretical, and not descriptive, let us turn to the primary concern, i.e., a critical discussion of deficiency theories of racial inequality.

Deficiency Theories

It was stated earlier that deficiency theories basically state that the inferior economic, social and political statuses of racial minorities are caused by deficiencies within the minority groups. Deficiency theories have the effect of "blaming the victim," to borrow a phrase from William Ryan.[7] In general, the deficiency said to be causing racial inequality has assumed three broad theoretical varieties: (1) biological, (2) structural, and (3) cultural. Biological deficiency theories locate the explanation of racial inequality in biological mechanisms, i.e. the body; structural deficiency theories in the group or some component thereof, usually the black family; and cultural deficiency theories locate the explanation of racial inequality in values and attitudes of the would be inferior group and are essentially psychical in nature. A critical discussion of each follows.

Biological Deficiency Theories

Biological deficiency theories attribute racial inequality to genetic, hereditary inferiority or biological selectivity. Proponents of these theories are often referred to as racists. They assert that a given race is inherently superior or inferior and that inequality is unconditional. Racism, as a doctrine or body of beliefs justifying the subordination of races, emerged from individuals holding such a view.[8] Racism

> ". . . maintains that race determines the cultural traits and psychological abilities of individuals. In addition, racism maintains that there are sharp differences between the races in psychological abilities and cultural traits and that the so-called superior race has the unique ability, talent and mission to control the so-called inferior race."[9]

Leading racist theorists in Europe were Arthur De Gobineau and Housten S. Chamberlain in Europe and Madison Grant in the United States, among others. Arthur DeGobineau (1816-1882) was a French Count who was opposed to the concept of emerging democracy and the principles of French Revolution. His ideas can be found in his work, Essay on the Inequality of Human Races. His concern was to explain why civilizations rise and fall. His answer has become a perennial one for racists then or now: too much race-mixing or miscegenation. His characterization of the "three" races strikes a familiar chord: whites were identified as "leaders," yellow people as possessing "stability," and blacks as

coterminous with "sensuality." He portrayed northern Europeans as the best representatives of man ever produced.[10]

Housten S. Chamberlain (1855-1927), English descent, thought that practically everything culturally advanced was due to German inventiveness and German racial superiority. His book was entitled, The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century. He was educated in Germany, married opera genius Richard Wagner's daughter, laid down a program of eugenics, i.e., salvation through selective breeding of the best, and thought that the tall blond Aryan was the best representative mankind had produced.[11] Madison Grant, of the United States, went even further than his European co-racists. In his book, The Passing of the Great Race (1916), Grant proposed explicit remedies for the "evils" of race degeneration, which included: laws against miscegenation; encouraging the fit to have more children and the unfit fewer; sterilization of defectives; and obliteration, if necessary.[12]

America has been so thoroughly racist historically that one does not have to draw upon the works of European scholars to find classic expressions of racism. Two great "democratic" leaders in America, who, while not approving of slavery, nevertheless advanced racist ideas. The two cited are Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. Thomas Jefferson's "Notes on Virginia" (1786) was racist literature, according to Berry and Tischler. Not only did Jefferson say that blacks smell bad, but that they are inferior to whites in reason, though there was nothing wrong with their memory. In other words, blacks can remember but can't think. Jefferson states " . . . that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstance, are inferior

to the whites in the endowment both of body and of mind."[13]

President Abraham Lincoln, who freed the slaves, was even more explicit as he spoke in Charleston, Illinois in 1858:

> "I will say, then, that I am not, nor have ever been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races, and that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters and jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say, in addition to this, that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they can't so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race."[14]

Explicit racist theories are not often advocated by "respected" scholars and leaders today; however, the hereditarianism of Arthur Jensen, Richard Herrnstein, Hans J. Eysenck and William Shockley are highly conduscive to, if not directly, racist explanations. Howard F. Taylor, a black sociologist at Princeton University, has questioned the assumptions and methodologies of Jensen, Herrnstein and Eysenck, among others, and strongly suggests that IQ is not an

empirically estimable quantity, contending that there is no clear basis for suggesting that there is a gene for intelligence.[15]

Hans J. Eysenck, a psychologist, contends (without evidence) that the black population in the United States represents a non-random inferior stock from Africa; that intelligence is highly heritable and that average differences in "intelligence" between blacks and whites is due to genetics. According to Eysenck, it was easier to catch "duller" slaves than intelligent ones from West Africa, that tribal chiefs sold their less intelligent subjects into slavery and that under slavery in the United States the smarter slaves were more likely to rebel and be killed. Thus blacks in the United States represent a nonrandom inferior group, for whom Eysenck is opposed to having higher educational programs designed to achieve racial parity.[16] Richard Herrnstein, on the other hand, sees the social system as moving toward "hereditary meritocracy" where the class system is based on inherited differences. He, too, believes that IQ is inherited; that high IQ people tend to marry high IQ; that "success" depends on IQ; and that all of this means that high social status will be concentrated among those with high IQ, i.e., "hereditary meritocracy."[17] For these reasons, Herrnstein believes that a truly egalitarian society will lead to a caste-like system based on heredity. Several reservations to Herrnstein are in order: (1) high IQ individuals need not marry each other; (2) high IQ parents do not always produce high IQ offspring; (3) high IQ does not necessarily bring about "success"; and (4) success is, in part, a variable quality. In the American capitalistic system it

is conceivable that success might be more easily obtained by being dishonest, manipulative, ruthless, obedient and greedy, than intelligent.

William Shockley, a Nobel laureate, while not given much credence in the "respected" literature, has been the subject of much heated debate. Across America he has been warning people of the deleterious effects of "dysgenics," i.e., the disportionate mating among genetically inferior individuals. Shockley is explicit in his assertion that blacks are genetically inferior and that something should be done about it. "Shockley proposes that we take individuals with IQ's below the average and offer them $1,000 for each IQ point they are below 100 as an incentive to be sterilized."[18]

Often overlooked in discussions of this nature is the convenience afforded by functionalism in stratification theory for a racist interpretation, i.e., differential privileges and rewards as attributable to the unequal possession of "scarce" talent. All one has to do is make the assumption that "scarce" talent is differentially inherited by race. Observed privileges and rewards can then be "justified" and "rationalized" by race.

It is clear that structured inequality in America, or the world, cannot be explained by biology or genetics. It is quite convenient for a group to believe that where it is, especially if where it is implies dominance, is due to natural endowments. Racist reactions and explanations emerged out of socio-political and economic circumstances

and it is not inconceivable that relative status losses or gains for blacks or whites during periods of drastic economic changes in the mode of production could result in a resurgence of racist expressions and reactions.

Deficiencies in Social Structure

The cause of racial inequality in these types of deficiency theories rests on the assumption that the reason racial groups are where they are is because of basic defects endemic to the structure of their groups, particularly the supposed defects as manifested in such basic groups as the black family. The continuing debate over the black family in contemporary American life attests to the singular manner in which the black family is seen as a "cause" of so many of the "ills" of black Americans. Thus, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, now a U.S. senator from New York, posited the notion in 1965 that the Negro family exhibited a weak family structure and causes instability and male role confusion which results in social pathologies.[19] The end result is low educational achievement, poverty and unemployment, i.e., racial inequality. It has never been clear to me why Moynihan, or for that matter, "strength of black family" advocates,[20] harp on the black family with such disdain and/or praise. It would seem that economic, ideological and political restructuring of American society and the black community would be a more profitable approach than a piecemeal social and psychological restructuring of the black family. The black family (or any other family) is not independent of the larger milieu of which it is a part; nor is it immune to the

devastating forces creating so much misery and pain for blacks in or outside particular family contexts. William J. Wilson (1978) and Eleanor Engram (1982) have shown clearly that the so-called "black matriarchy" is class related.[21] In addition, the emphasis on maternal influence is misplaced in so far as maternal effects and influences are quite pervasive among most groups and classes in American society, according to Hyman and Reed.[22] Engram has suggested that it is not certain whether or to what extent, the black family is, in fact, matriarchal.[23]

What is said above should not be construed to mean that the interface between public policy and black family life should not be vigilantly pursued and investigated. What is being said is that so-called deficiencies within the black family cannot be used to explain racial inequality. It is not the type of family organization that causes racial inequality. Instead, racial inequities are more likely to explain the probability or likelihood that certain things are going to happen to black parents and their children in the course of their lives.

Cultural Deficiency Theories

In cultural deficiency theories, racial inequality is seen as emanating from cultural values and traits associated with minority group members. The emphasis is not social strucutre, but attitudes and values. Attitudes and values of minority groups are seen as defective and inhibit achievement and success as determined by dominant group values. Generally, cultural deficiency theories assume that an

independent, autonomous "lower class culture" or "culture of poverty" exists which impacts negatively on individuals who share such a culture. Short run hedonism, negativism, fatalism, maliciousness, lack of planning and lack of a work ethic are counter productive values and attitudes that handicap and place individuals who share these values at a "disadvantage." Thus the concept "culturally disadvantaged" is often invoked to label such individuals.

Edward Banfield, Oscar Lewis and Thomas Sowell are a few of the noted scholars who have attributed inequality among groups to differences in cultural values and attitudes.[24] Sowell contends that a crucial problem in the achievement of economic success of minority groups is in the area of attitudes and values. He states:

> "Perhaps the greatest dilemma in attempts to raise ethnic minority income is that those methods which have historically proved successful - self-reliance, work skills, education, business experience - are all slow developing, while those methods which are more direct and immediate - job quotas, charity, subsidies, preferential treatment - tend to undermine self-reliance and pride of achievement in the long run. If the history of American ethnic groups show anything, it is how large a role has been played by attitudes - and particularly attitudes of self-reliance. The success of the antebellum "free persons of color compared to the later black migrants to the North, the advancement of Italian-Americans beyond the Irish-Americans who had many other advantages, the resilience of the

Japanese-Americans despite numerous campaigns of persecution, all emphasize the importance of this factor, however mundane and unfashionable it may be."[25]

Apart from the difficulty in establishing what a "cultural deficiency" is, culture-specific theories should not be seen as thoroughly and singularly causative; but, rather as adaptive expressions in need of being placed within a more universalistic context so that we won't be so inclined to view values and attitudes as a priori and self-generating. Stanley Lieberson, in his award winning book, A Piece of the Pie, is very critical of those who would account for differences bewteen racial and ethnic groups on the basis of cultural differences without an independent measure of culture. Likewise, Lieberson finds no evidence that blacks were less committed to education than European immigrants. With respect to explaining achievement differences between racial and ethnic groups, Lieberson contends:

"It is very difficult to find even rough quantitative measures of such cultural and normative matters . . . I might add that the cultural and normative explanations often rest on a deceptive form of circular reasoning, not at all uncommon in race and ethnic studies. Why are two or more groups different with respect to some characteristic or dependent variable? Presumably, they differ in their values or norms? The argument then frequently involves using the behavioral attribute one is trying to explain as the indicator of the normative or value

difference one is trying to use as the explanation. A pure case of circular reasoning! Obviously racial and ethnic groups may differ from one another in their values and norms, but an independent measure of such values and norms must be obtained to justify such an explanation."[26]

Barrera has attempted to specify the steps employed by cultural deficiency theories in arriving at their conclusions.[27] First, find a disadvantaged group. Second, assume that the cause of the disadvantage lies within the group itself. Third, assume that cultural phenomena are the cause of the disadvantage. Fourth, find out what cultural attributes of the group "explain" the group's disadvantaged status. I might add that it would not hurt to have a vivid imagination through it all.

Summary and Conclusions

Deficiency theories of racial inequality are basically inadequate in explaining observed racial differences between groups. Basically, they invite us to look for the explanation for racial inequality in "bodies," "heads," and sub-cultural groups of the minority groups. The "deficiencies" of minority groups are too unilaterally seen as causes. Seldom are deficiency theories cognizant of the possibility that the "deficiencies" in question might be results (effects) rather than the "causes of the very conditions of racial inequality that these theories seek to explain."[1] Such theories encourage us to look away from the dominant group, the class structure and larger social system for the explanation of racial inequality.

Social inequality is as old as written history itself. It can be patterned on almost any attribute; however, the most salient bases for patterned inequality have been sex, age, religion, ethnicity and race.

I take the position that social inequality by race can and should be eliminated. This does not mean that every conceivable manner in which individuals as individuals are different, and unequal, can or should be eliminated. Theoretically, it is conceivable that racial inequality can be drastically reduced or eliminated without changing to any appreciable degree the larger political and economic system. But if change is affected in this manner, neither the forces or relations of production would be drastically altered. All you would have under this type of arrangement would be a change in the racial character of social inequality. Racial groups would thus become more equally diffused throughout the class structure in proportion to their numbers. As attractive as this approach appears, it is limited in that the larger question of social inequality has been basically left unaddressed.

FOOTNOTES

*This paper was read before the Association of Social and Behavioral Scientists, March 22, 1984, Nashville, Tennessee.

[1]Mario Barrera, Race and Class in The Southwest (Notre Dame, 1979), p. 174.

[2]Leonard Reissman, Inequality in American Society (Glenview, Ill., 1973) p. 1.

[3]Ibid., p. 1.

[4]Johnathan H. Turner and Charles E. Starnes, Inequality: Privilege and Poverty in America (Pacific Palisades, Calif., 1976), p. 2.

[5]Ibid., p. 3.

[6]Reissman, op. cit., p. 71.

[7]William Ryan, Blaming The Victim (New York, 1971).

[8]For a discussion of racism and its development in the world and America, see James E. Conyers, "Racism Ain't Dead Yet," Journal of the Association of Social and Behavioral Sciences, XVII, (Spring, 1981), 30-33; and John Hope Franklin, Racial Inequality in America (Chicago, 1976).

[9]Conyers, op. cit., p. 30.

[10]Ibid., p. 32.

[11]Ibid., p. 32.

[12]Ibid., p. 32.

[13]Brewton Berry and Henry L. Tischler, Race and Ethnic Relations, 4th ed. (Boston, 1978), p. 54.

[14]Ibid., p. 7.

[15]Howard F. Taylor, The IQ Game: A Methodological Inquiry into the Heredity - Environment Controversy (New Brunswick, N.J., 1980).

[16]Hans J. Eysenck, The IQ Argument. (New York, 1971).

[17]Richard J. Herrnstein, "IQ," The Atlantic Monthly (Sept., 1971), pp. 43-46.

[18]See Berry and Tischler, op. cit., p. 77.

[19]See Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy, (Cambridge, MA, 1967).

[20]Robert Hill, The Strength of Black Families, (New York, 1972).

[21]William J. Wilson, The Declining Significance of Race, (Chicago, 1978); and Eleanor Engram, Science, Myth, Reality: The Black Family in One-Half Century of Research, (Westport, CT, 1982).

[22]Herbert H. Hyman and John S. Reed, "Black Matriarchy Reconsidered," Public Opinion Quarterly, 33 (Fall, 1969), pp. 346-54.

[23]Engram, op. cit.

[24]Edward Banfield, The Unheavenly City Revisited, (Boston, 1974); Oscar Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty," Scientific American, 1966, 215, pp. 19-25; and Thomas Sowell, Race and Economics, (New York, 1975).

[25]Sowell, op. cit., p. 238.

[26]Stanley Lieberson, A Piece of the Pie: Blacks and White Immigrants Since 1880, (Berkley, 1980).

[27]Barrera, op. cit., p. 181.

[28]Ibid., p. 180.